

“We become What We Consume”
A Sermon for Maundy Thursday 2019
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After graduating from college, I moved to France, where I studied French in Paris and lived on \$3 a day. I lived on the fashionable Rue de Courcelles in the 8 arrondissement in a six-floor walk-up to a tiny chamber de bonne or maid’s room with a small window on a Monsarde rooftop, which looked out over the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

Each Sunday, I worshipped in a different church, trying to get to know Paris better, searching for the perfect church as if there were such a thing. I worshipped at St. Germain de Pres, across from Les Deux Maggot, where Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre sipped coffee, at St. Julien-le-Pauvre, where Thomas Aquinas went to church, at St. Augustin, where the soldier Charles de Foucauld converted and became a desert mystic after making his confession, at St. Eustache, where Louis Vierne once served as organist, at St. Sulpice, which featured a beautiful women and girls choir, at St. Severin, one of the few churches full of young families, at Sacre Couer, overlooking Paris, and, of course, at Notre Dame.

Notre Dame was towering and imposing, a wall of carved stone through which people passed like ants into the darkened and extraordinarily long nave, where tourists wandered around the periphery while worshippers gathered before the altar. There was so much to see – statues, carvings and the rose window, which on a sunny day lets light transform the human soul.

As Notre Dame was consumed by fire this past week, each of us who set foot inside felt as though something we valued was being destroyed. The ancient and venerable churches and cathedrals of the world were all built with one purpose most in mind – to reenact the Last Supper. As Anglicans, we believe that Christ is never more present in our lives than in that moment when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ during Communion. Christ’s Body and mingles with our body and nourishes us in ways that no words can define.

On Maundy Thursday we recall how on the last night of his life Jesus and his closest friends sat down to eat one final meal together. The Romans, the Jews and even one of his closest friends were all out to get him. Jesus knew that his time had run out. His friends and he would never be together again.

It was an unforgettable scene, a scene that perhaps haunted them until the day that they died. It was a scene captured in art for centuries to come from Leonardo da Vinci’s half-ruined fresco in Milan to Salvador Dali’s Sacrament of the Last Supper. There in the shadows, the stillness, the hushed voices of people speaking intently, knowing that danger was lurking and time was short, they sat eating bread and drinking wine with the one they loved.

For 2,000 years the Church has reenacted this meal. It has come to mark, define and transform us. This sacred meal makes us God’s Church. We become what we consume – the Body of

Christ. The Last Supper is a prefiguring of our own last supper. What will it be like when time runs out for us? Who will be gathered around us? What words will be spoken? What will be our legacy?

At table, Jesus said, "You will seek me." No words he spoke ever hit closer to home. We seek for answers to our questions – questions about life and questions about death, questions about what is the right thing to do and what is wrong, questions about the unspeakable things that go on in the world. We seek strength, comfort, courage, peace and a clear path forward.

From the smallest church on the coast of Maine to a Quaker meeting house outside Philadelphia to the Washington National Cathedral, each sacred space was erected to help people like us find a place to reenact an ancient meal and seek answers to the questions of life, to seek God in the midst of our journeys and find what we can find nowhere else. Then we are sent out to share Jesus's love to others. The message is embedded in a meal.

The two biggest sellers in any bookstore are cookbooks and diet books. The cookbooks tell us how to prepare food. The diet books tell us how not to eat it. Orson Wells once said, "My doctor has advised me to give up those intimate little dinners for four, unless, of course, there are three other people eating with me." My favorite dieting story came from a member of Weight Watchers, who proudly announced at a meeting, "This is the first year that my children realized that chocolate Easter bunnies came with ears."

We are obsessed with food. A poll taken several years ago revealed that 41% of men and 55% of women consider themselves overweight. A California scientist computed that the average person eats sixteen times their body weight each year while the average horse eats only eight times its body weight. He concluded that if we want to lose weight, we must eat like a horse.

Even God seems obsessed by food. Have you noticed how frequently meals appear in the Bible? Everyone is eating. God's number one concern appears to be feeding us – manna from heaven, a Passover Seder; a prophet, a widow and her son surviving on a jarful of food; David eating the priest's sacred bread, Jesus turning water into wine, multiplying fish and loaves and cooking breakfast on the beach for his disciples after he was resurrected. Jesus instructed his friends to recognize him in the breaking of the bread. He taught them to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus commanded Peter, "Feed my sheep." After Jesus was resurrected, he reappeared in the Upper Room and asked them, "Do you have anything to eat?"

Food, food and more food. Every religion has a sacred meal. While sharing a meal, we let down our guard and become more real and create relationships and community.

Jesus gave few commands. You can count them on one hand. Maundy Thursday comes from one of those commands. Jesus commanded us to celebrate the Eucharist. "Do this in remembrance of me." Maundy is a corruption of the Latin *Dies Mandati* meaning "the Day of the Command." The great Anglican scholar Dom Gregory Dix wrote,

At the heart of Christianity is the Eucharist, a thing of absolute simplicity – the taking, blessing and giving of a cup of wine and water as these were done with their new meaning by a young Jew before and after supper with his friends on the night before he died. He had told his friends to do this henceforward with the new meaning for the recalling of him, and they have done it always since.

Was ever a command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable need... Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of dogma or for a crop of good wheat...for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America... And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this.

I close by taking us back to France, where on Christmas Eve in 1794 a Eucharist took place in a garret on the fifth floor of a Parisian mansion in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs during the French Revolution. The revolutionaries had abolished Christmas and December.

The Countess Lafayette was being held prisoner in the garret. She reached under her skirt and took out a black pouch that contained some bread and a tiny vessel of wine. She unpinned her bodice and pulled forth a silver crucifix which her mother had given her. She propped the crucifix against the back of the chair, the only piece of furniture in the room apart from her straw mattress. The countess placed two stubs of candles on either side of the crucifix with the tinder box ready to light them. Then she waited.

Would he ever come? Yes, he finally came – Pere Carrichon, a priest disguised as a carpenter who had come to do a repair. He laid out a hammer and nails as if preparing to work, should anyone enter the room. Then he raised his hand in blessing and whispered the words of the ancient liturgy that goes back to Christ himself.

The countess sank to her knees, closed her eyes and drew deeply again on the faith that had sustained her throughout her life. In that moment, the little room in Paris was connected to a small Upper Room in Jerusalem and to Christ himself. For a moment, she forgot the brutal atrocities of the French Revolution, the fear and the uncertainty of life and her hope was restored. May it happen to you, too, each time receive the bread and the wine and the Body of Christ mingles with your precious body and you become what you have consumed. Amen.